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PROGRAM CBS Evening News STATION WUSA TV  
CBS Network

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SUBJECT Customs-CIA Dispute

DAN RATHER: For months there've been increasing indications that the CIA may have been cozying up to and protecting known drug dealers to carry out secret operations in Central America.

Rita Braver has been investigating some new evidence.

J RITA BRAVER: Law enforcement sources say a plane from Honduras that arrived March 21st here at Miami International Airport touched off a major blow-up between the CIA and U. S. Customs over the CIA's use of an alleged drug dealer in secret missions to Central America.

When Customs' officers began inspecting the plane, a DC-6 like this, the pilots protested. They called on Mr. Palmer, who came to the airport claiming his firm ran the flight for the State Department and the officers would get in big trouble for the inspection. Customs ran a check on Palmer and identified him as Michael B. Palmer, jailed on drug charges in Colombia, now under federal indictment for drug smuggling. At the same time, Customs' officials in Washington got word from the CIA acknowledging "It's our flight." No drugs were found on the plane. But sources say Customs Commissioner William von Raab hit the roof, blasting the CIA for employing an alleged drug dealer who tried to block an inspection.

Palmer reportedly worked under contract for Vortex Corporation, a Miami aircraft firm previously involved in some controversial State Department humanitarian flights. CBS News went to an address listed for Vortex.

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[Clip of angry confrontation.]

Palmer's attorneys did not return phone calls. Von Raab would not comment, and the CIA would neither confirm nor deny the story.

The incident comes in the wake of recent allegations that the CIA has been employing known drug dealers in Central America. And some law enforcement officials are asking why the agency isn't being more careful.

Rita Braver, CBS News, Washington.